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Through a glass darkly

THE PREDICTION OF SOVIET INTENTIONS

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The record of U.S. intelligence in anticipating Soviet tactical and intermediate-range intentions, understanding them, and putting them in proper perspective is not particularly distinguished. We were unable (except, of course, for the then DCI) to predict the Soviet intention to put missiles into Cuba until we saw the photographs of them already there. We failed to anticipate the construction of the Berlin Wall, the ouster of Khrushchev, the timing of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and other events of importance.

More significantly, we often have failed to understand—or at least have not conveyed to the policy maker—the larger meaning of major Soviet initiatives, and to give proper perspective to Soviet actions. We were much too tardy, for example, in coming to realize the seriousness of differences between China and the USSR, and the effect of these differences—particularly in the mid-1950's—on Soviet policy. Similarly, we were slow to recognize the importance and scope of the Soviet "peace program" in the late 1960's, even after its formal approval by the 24th Party Congress.

The conclusion is inescapable that—while intelligence assessments of Soviet military and economic capabilities have been remarkably accurate—treatment of Soviet political intentions and decisions has not measured up.

Why We Have Done Poorly

Our failure to anticipate or even interpret these and other developments better should come as no surprise. It derives in no small way from the difficulty inherent in trying to predict how political leaders perceive situations, and how they will react in given set of circumstances. It is a very difficult task in a free society; it is that much harder in a closed one, where little if anything is known of the personal lives and psyches of individual leaders, or of internal battles at the top.

The Soviet Union is such a society. It has no free press to bare state secrets or personal rivalries, to expose options under consideration by the leadership, or any of the other juicy tidbits familiar to the American newspaper reader. Except for occasional glimpses in the press of internal institutional disputes, discussion of state policy and intentions is carried on in secret—and there are few leaks. Moreover, instead of a single decision maker, the Soviet system has a 15-man Politburo and a Central Committee of several hundred members, in both of which constantly shifting balances can make or undo any plan or intention.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge is analyzing correctly the Soviets' perception of problems and opportunities, both foreign and domestic. There is a wide cultural gap between a college-educated analyst in the West and the Soviet leadership. As Robert Conquest has stated, "the Soviet leaders are not to be treated as though their motives and conceptions were in our sense natural and rational. The particular leadership now in control in Russia derives from a tradition which is alien in both aim and method to our own." Not only are they

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the products of a centuries-old system of absolutist rule; they are far more isolated from Western ideas and experience than even their Tsarist predecessors. Few among those at the top level have traveled widely, much less spent any period of time in the West. Their narrowness is difficult to comprehend. The Czech Communist leaders, returning from Moscow in late 1968, remarked that they had expected narrow dogmatists, but not "vulgar thugs." While that is perhaps too strong, the fact remains that our perception of situations is probably widely divergent from the Kremlin's perception of those same situations. The Soviet Union is a strange and idiosyncratic polity, not to be understood or dealt with without considerable conscious effort. And often even that is not enough.

Another factor complicating our assessment of Soviet intentions is the role of error and irrationality in the Kremlin. No political leadership is immune to mistakes and, indeed, the Soviets have made their share. Just as important, however, is the mental attitude of the leadership. For example, the Soviets, lacking reliable allies, throughout their history have had a certain siege mentality. Moreover, they are clearly concerned about their relative backwardness, a point underlined by Khrushchev's admission of a sense of inferiority over his smaller plane as he flew into Geneva in 1955 and, even now, their continued insistence on dealing on the basis of "equality." Thus, there is the possibility that after analyzing all the facts and alternatives, the Soviet leadership will react out of personal spite, a sense of psychological or cultural inferiority, or fear.

In discussing the vagaries of personality and differences in culture, we have just scratched the surface of the difficulty of predicting Soviet intentions. For example, one invaluable legacy bequeathed by Lenin to his successors was a sense of political expediency and opportunism probably without modern equal. Stalin and his successors were relieved by historical determinism of the need to be concerned about the final victory or defeat of Communism. Their main task has been the survival of the "home of socialism" and the furthering of its interests. For that task, Lenin's legacy was essential, imbuing Soviet internal and foreign intentions with almost unrivalled flexibility—and unpredictability.

Internal Politics

The changeability of Soviet intentions, foreign and domestic, is a natural product of the internal political process. The Soviet Union, like other countries, is continually beset by minor crises. In that dictatorial, ultra-centralized system, however, the number of these time- and energy-consuming problems demanding the attention of the top leadership is magnified many times. As a result, the Politburo probably can only rarely take the time—and then only some members of it—to reflect on future problems or future opportunities, and then come to a decision on how best to meet a problem or exploit an opportunity. Consequently, it seems likely that few Soviet "intentions" emerge as the result of a conscious attempt to formulate long-range or even middle-range plans.

Those few intentions which do receive lengthy consideration and require a clear-cut decision by the leadership generally concern large objectives often intimately related to economic or military issues. The difficulty in reaching decisions even on these is well illustrated by the quinquennial travail over the Five Year Plan. Bruising bureaucratic struggles over resource allocation, priorities for various industries, and even the general direction of the Plan—whether to emphasize heavy industry, the consumer, or agriculture—are involved in a preparation process drawn out over months and even years. Yet after a decision is made, the plan is still subject to alteration and modification throughout its

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existence. A similarly difficult time probably attends decisions on long-range military intentions. A debacle, such as the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, can perhaps galvanize wide support to build a strategic force equal to that of the United States, but other decisions on particular weapon systems, the strength of conventional forces, and so forth no doubt call forth the worst demons of bureaucratic and political rivalry.

Less cosmic issues, however, may never demand a conscious decision by the Politburo. In many instances, plans or intentions have a life of their own, drifting along earlier guidelines until circumstances force a change. Intentions are sometimes the product of an internal political trade-off or compromise in which one faction agrees to support another's program in return for a similar favor. There are also intentions decided by events, in which the leadership finds itself in a situation where national pride, internal politics, or commitments preclude bailing out, and leave only the course of pressing ahead. Soviet Middle East policy in early 1970 could be an example of this. Moreover, some Soviet intentions probably are born full-grown because of the actions of a representative or client which the Kremlin may find either too embarrassing or too inconvenient to disavow.

Yet another element in calculating Soviet intentions is the fact that one intention can evolve into another—with attendant changes in rationale. As an example, the Moscow anti-ballistic missile, apparently originally intended as a defense of the capital against major attack, was scaled down because of its inadequacy in the face of increasingly sophisticated offensive systems. Over time, both the intention and the rationalization evolved into something quite different from those originally envisaged. A political equivalent is suggested by Soviet initiatives for a conference on European security. First broached in the 1950's as an anti-German measure, such a conference has more recently been seen by Moscow as a means to insure Soviet involvement in Europe in the future and to speed the reduction of U.S. influence and its military presence on the Continent.

A change in leadership also can significantly alter intentions, as evidenced by the replacement of Khrushchev in 1964. Soviet intentions in a number of areas both at home and abroad were modified, in some cases substantially, in his wake. Changes at even less exalted levels also can influence the direction of Soviet intentions, whether it be the death or replacement of a high-level economic baron, a military leader, or a political/party figure.

Finally, the bureaucracy can affect the interpretation and implementation of a given intention. Aside from sheer incompetence, bureaucracies can drag their feet in putting policies or intentions into practice, and can even actively obstruct the will of a political leadership—particularly if special bureaucratic interests are at stake. Moreover, bureaucratic inertia can also thwart the intentions of the leadership.

External Influences

The plans and policies of the USSR, like those of every country, are subject to external forces—the initiatives of other governments, foreign aggression, internal turmoil in client or subject states, and so forth. Soviet sensitivity to the actions and intentions of other powers is particularly acute in view of the new relationship between the United States and China.

It is frequently argued on the one hand that Soviet intentions are formed in reaction to outside influences or pressures, or on the other hand that they are planned well in advance and are ruthlessly implemented. Both of these formulations are too simple. For example, the same intention can be both reactive and

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assertive, depending on the perspective. Current Soviet initiatives and intentions in Western Europe can be seen as a reaction to the Chinese problem and the possibility of closer U.S.-Chinese relations. Yet in a strictly European context, those same intentions are quite assertive. The important lesson, however, is that external influence—whether it be an opportunity to exploit or a problem to be dealt with—significantly affects Soviet intentions and substantially increases their mutability.

Capabilities

Another factor affecting Soviet intentions is that of capability. If there are no troops or installations on the Sino-Soviet border, a large-scale ground attack on China clearly is not a near-term Soviet intention; if there is no missile in service or under development accurate enough, or with a warhead big enough, to destroy a Minuteman in its silo, then there is probably no intention of a first strike. The absence of capability thus can effectively preclude intention. Unfortunately for the analyst, the reverse is not true: the existence of capability does not necessarily indicate the intention to use it. A good example of this was the Sino-Soviet border situation in 1969, when some analysts believed that the Soviets would attack China because they had the capability. This was a failure to predict Moscow's intention accurately. The task of analyzing Soviet intentions can only become more difficult as Soviet military capabilities are expanded to a point where Moscow has numerous options in a given situation.

In assessing Soviet intentions, a point often overlooked is that political as well as military capabilities must be considered. The Soviet system itself imposes certain limitations on the leadership. It would be unthinkable, for example, for the Politburo to contemplate dismantling the system of collectivized agriculture. Even though that would benefit the country economically, it is an unacceptable alternative for political and ideological reasons. Similarly, removing censorship is also beyond the political, though not the physical, capability of the leadership. The limitations posed by political and ideological capabilities—or lack thereof—often narrow the alternatives or intentions open to the ruling elite in internal affairs.

On the other hand, in the Soviet system political capabilities in foreign policy broaden rather than limit the range of possible intentions. Answering to none but those in power, inseparably tied to no ally, the Soviet Union politically is capable of justifying—and doing—virtually anything. The Soviet Union has never been inhibited from collaborating with another power because it would demand forsaking ideological principles or the interests of an erstwhile ally.

Scope and Time

So far, we have elaborated a number of factors which together make Soviet intentions extremely changeable and therefore quite elusive. Internal politics, external influences, and a host of other pressures all render "intentions," even the most fundamental, a mixed and constantly changing bag of expediency, compromise decisions, indecision, expressions of personal influence, and opportunism. As if that did not make them baffling enough to sort out, they also vary according to their scope and time frame.

The most important intentions, and therefore those relatively less flexible, are the ones concerning long-term strategy. These broad intentions are generally expressions of Soviet national interest and are consequently relatively durable and predictable—although the means of their achievement are remarkably

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flexible. Attempts to achieve military parity with the United States, the political and military neutralization of Western Europe, and the military and political containment of China are examples of durable strategic intentions. The Soviets have in mind specific methods for fulfilling each, yet are aware that their accomplishment—if possible at all—will take years.

Intentions of lesser scope and of shorter range may be considered tactical, and they often relate to the specific means of achieving strategic intentions. Referring to the same examples cited above, the development of a specific weapon system such as the SS-9 is a tactical move intended to help realize the strategic intention of parity; the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and discussions of mutual force reductions reflect tactical intentions to achieve West European neutralization; and the friendship treaties and military/economic aid in South Asia, a tactical means to contain China. Tactical intentions also encompass sudden military deployments, VIP visits or tours, friendship treaties, and so on. These kinds of intentions are especially subject to expediency, opportunism, and chance; they are easily altered or eliminated, and replaced by something more likely to help achieve the larger objective. They may take a few years to achieve, or only a few months.

Of course, some Soviet intentions are a mix of strategic and tactical intentions. The invasion of Czechoslovakia involved all kinds of tactical aspects, including the military preparation, the date of invasion, and political action. At the same time, however, the invasion fulfilled a strategic intention which was to limit, if not destroy, the influence of Czech reformism on the other satellites and the USSR itself.

Priority and Action

Two final factors affecting intentions need to be mentioned. Most strategic intentions are by definition vitally important to the Soviet Union. But shorter-range tactical intentions have widely differing priorities. For example, shipping Soviet military equipment and personnel to Egypt in early 1970 for a time clearly had a higher priority than sending military aid to other third world countries.

A second factor is the frequent gap between intention and action. The best-laid plans often go awry, and for a multitude of reasons intentions can fail to become accomplished deeds. Any of the variables cited in this essay can consign an intention to oblivion. By the same token, it would be attributing too much foresight to the Soviets to assume that all their actions flow from intentions, to believe that every move is calculated and planned. Often the Soviets are caught in situations not of their own making, where they must act without prior planning. Their intercession in the Jordanian-Syrian crisis in September 1970 is a good example of this, as were their reactions to the first Chinese border incursion in March 1969 and to their expulsion from Egypt in July 1972. These responses had not been programmed beforehand; they were last-minute reactions to critical situations.

All the foregoing hopefully suggests the enormous pliancy and complexity characteristic of Soviet intentions. Such intentions are decided, develop, evolve, or simply spring forth in a myriad of ways, and even the most important are subject to alteration. They clearly are not decided for the coming year or decade by 15 men in Politburo assembled and voting for the record. Soviet intentions are far more elusive, both in formulation and practice, than that. Lenin's legacy, that sense of political expendiency and flexibility, is plainly still with us—and perhaps becoming ever more important.

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Our Limited Assets

The problems posed to the analyst in predicting Soviet intentions could be somewhat diminished, one might think, by the unique assets available to intelligence. Yet, in reality, our intelligence collection capabilities are not very adept at obtaining accurate or reliable information on the thinking of the Soviet leadership. U.S. intelligence resources and the overt press are best suited to collecting intelligence on military hardware and the economy. Except for occasional bits of special intelligence, defectors, and unique finds like Penkovskiy, these collection methods only rarely provide the access to the Kremlin necessary to analyze Soviet intentions with assurance. Thus, in predicting Soviet intentions, we work in an area where our special assets are of only marginal assistance.

Equally as important as our collection problems are our intellectual problems in analyzing the Soviet Union. As the Soviet leaders follow a certain policy for a period of time, the analyst perceives a pattern of response. It is within the context of that pattern that the political analyst interprets and predicts Soviet behavior. All too often, however, when the policy and hence the pattern change, there is a lag between that change and the analyst's perception of it. Indeed, where we consistently fail to measure up is in detecting such changes soon enough to help the policy maker.

What is needed, in effect, is "near-real-time" political interpretation. The analyst must somehow perceive a change in policy between the time the decision is made in Moscow and the time when that change is manifested in action—such as the building of the Berlin Wall or the dispatch of missiles to Cuba. Without our ever-yearned-for source on the Politburo, this is indeed a difficult task. And whatever chance of success we have is further diminished by the simple fact that the analyst sitting at his desk day in, day out becomes complacent, his perspective narrow, and his perceptions stale.

Our Analytical Weapons

Despite this litany of analytical woe, we are not altogether helpless. We know something, for example, about the Soviet leadership. We know something about their personalities and their methods of cooperation. We know generally how Brezhnev's techniques and style differ from those of Khrushchev, and how Khrushchev's were different from Stalin's. If we are not in the position of being able to read their intentions at a given moment, we still have a reasonable knowledge of the motivations and attitudes which will go to form those intentions. We are, it may be said, "in the position of a general, who naturally does not know his opponent's intentions, but knows the style and traditions of that opponent's army and his personal style of fighting."

In addition, as mentioned above, we in intelligence have the invaluable asset of knowing a good deal about our opponent's capabilities. Our assessments of his military strength, present and future, have been proved accurate time and again. We are helped by a detailed knowledge of his economy and its capabilities and limitations. And knowledge of the Soviet system gives us a rather accurate reading of his domestic and foreign political capabilities. We have some good insights into how that system works, into what makes it tick.

We also have the important asset of experience in looking at Soviet affairs. The lessons learned during years of analysis have been passed down, along with an enormous body of information collected on the USSR. Moreover, we have individual analysts whose long experience provides them with useful insights into Soviet actions and intentions. Finally, the ability for frequent assembly of specialists in Soviet propaganda, internal affairs, foreign policy, the military,

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and the economy, to focus on a particular subject or to exchange ideas and information, gives intelligence perhaps a unique institutional capability.

Doing the Job Better

Nevertheless, in view of our past record, to say we will keep plugging away at the problem is not enough. Specific steps can be taken to improve our ability at least to offer the policy maker a more accurate appraisal of the options open to the Soviet leaders in a given situation, and to provide a better estimate of their more likely choices. Moreover, there are ways to improve our ability to understand and to report the significance of Soviet actions, and to place them in perspective in relation to larger Soviet aims.

At relatively little expense and inconvenience, the following remedial measures could be undertaken:

As stated earlier, there is a tremendous cultural and historical gap between the USSR and the West. An analyst trying to understand the mentality of the Soviet leaders or their approach to or perception of problems is seriously handicapped without some background in Soviet history and, in particular, Russian history and culture. The importance of understanding this Russian heritage in analyzing present Soviet thinking and behavior can hardly be overemphasized. Intelligence agencies should take steps to insure that future analysts have training in Russian and Soviet history and culture. Analysts now in place without such training should be sent to school to acquire it.

To encourage originality of thought and analytical imagination, and generally to stimulate greater cross-fertilization of ideas, there should be instituted a regular rotation of Soviet political analysts and supervisors among offices with current, estimative, and in-depth research responsibilities. The perspective each could bring to the others would undoubtedly improve the analysis of all.

Further to stimulate analytical imagination, originality, and perspective, periodic—but frequent—exchanges should be arranged between intelligence analysts of Soviet affairs and provocative specialists on the USSR outside the government, e.g. Adam Ulman, George Kennan, Robert Conquest. Such men are experienced and well-versed in Soviet affairs; it is a terrific waste of a valuable asset not to be able to probe their minds. While the views of some outsiders on Soviet intentions would doubtless be unorthodox, the exchanges would certainly provoke intelligence analysts to re-think their own views and allow them to pick up new ideas and information.

If the U.S. intelligence community is to retain a corps of well-trained, expert Sovietologists, it must provide material and psychological incentives for them to remain as Soviet analysts and not to move on to non-Soviet-oriented positions. Inexperience and constant turnover of analysts are hardly conducive to obtaining a better grasp of Soviet intentions. Possible incentives might include promoting analysts to higher grades without assigning them administrative responsibilities. Greater opportunities to travel and meet with other Soviet specialists would be yet another incentive, as would greater encouragement to write for outside publications and to speak before internal and outside gatherings.

More attention should be paid by political analysts to the Soviet perception of U.S. and Chinese intentions and actions. These two countries are without any question among the most significant influences on Soviet intentions and actions. We must be prepared to report that certain U.S. actions or plans will affect the Soviet leadership, and to estimate how they will affect it. At the same time, U.S. policy makers should be made aware that accurate and useful intelligence judgments on Soviet intentions cannot be made without some knowledge of the substance of high-level exchanges.

No one should be permitted the luxury of deference on substantive matters. There should be far more insistent probing and questioning at all levels to assure that all possible Soviet options in a given situation have been investigated. Those options generally outside the current pattern of Soviet behavior should be given special attention. In sum, the analytical atmosphere must be made more lively.

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> Finally, a better channel should be established to convey speculative and/or unorthodox views of experienced analysts to the upper echelons of the various intelligence agencies. This might be done by means of gists of only a paragraph or two. Acquaintance with such views could provide officials with a better grasp of Soviet options and also serve to warn them of possible Soviet actions or intentions. Too often, perceptive yet highly speculative analyses remain unknown beyond the analyst level—only to be revived in a post-mortem.

Intelligence cannot realistically assure "near-real-time" identification of changes in Soviet policy. We simply are not able to read the minds of the Politburo. But we can improve our performance by encouraging fresh thinking, imagination, and originality. At the same time, we—and those we serve—should be aware of our limitations, and willing to admit that the political analyst is neither seer nor mind-reader. The most we can promise is to interpret how we think the Soviets perceive problems and opportunities, to set out fully the Kremlin's options and, after vigorous discussion, to offer our analysis on the most likely course of action. This is what we have tried to do in the past with generally unsatisfactory results. To do better, we must consider some changes in the way we do business.

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